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Missile and Deterrent Gaps

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If the Eisenhower administration wished to keep the nation's missile-defense posture out of the campaign debate this year, it is unfortunate that the Pentagon was allowed to produce its new estimates downgrading Soviet rocketry strength just as the great national political argument was being launched.

But the fact is that, willy-nilly, there were new intelligence estimates which seemed to reduce the expected "missile gap" between Soviet missile strength and our lesser strength in the early 1960's. And Defense Secretary Thomas S. Gates, Jr., in a somewhat inept press conference permitted the oversimplified impression to get about that the new intelligence estimates were based not on Soviet capabilities but on the "intention" of the Soviet Government. And quite naturally, the Democrats and a lot of other people have been asking, "How do you gauge somebody's intention? Is that a safe yardstick, after history so seriously misgauged Hitler's intention, to name one tragedy?"

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Now the Central Intelligence Agency's able director, Allen W. Dulles, has cleared up, to a degree, the confusion over the intelligence estimates.

Mr. Dulles has pointed out that in estimating Soviet production in any military line—the now-obsolescent heavy Soviet bombers, for instance—until the research and development stage is completed and effectiveness tests are conducted and factories have gone into serial production—until then, intelligence estimates must be based mainly on "capability." And in a system geared to military efficiency, capability will be very high. Hence the early estimates that the Soviets would run up a 3-to-1 advantage in missiles.

But as more hard facts become available, and assembly lines go into action, it is possible to gauge definite production "intentions" from what actually is going forward. Sometimes it is "probable programming" that is estimated, sometimes the actual program.

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A main point to be noticed by the national political debaters is that this revising of estimates is not something new. It goes on all the time, says Director Dulles. First capabilities are assessed; then as a pattern begins to emerge, the estimates are based on the likely construction program."

But, of course, this is not the whole story. The missile gap is not merely a question of comparing the total of Soviet ICBMs (intercontinental missiles) versus the total of American ICBMs. If the United States had 100 ICBMs while the Soviets had 300, that 100 could do as much damage to a surprise attacker—in the retaliation phase—as to make his attack unwise and foolhardy.

But the real question is: How many would survive for retaliation after the first enemy blow? Here is where the more accurate phrase "deterrent gap" comes into play. If plenty of striking power would survive the surprise Soviet blow, then the United States has a valid deterrent against sudden attack. If very few rockets, planes, fighter bombers, would survive, then there exists a "deterrent gap" until that failing is rectified.

Gen. Thomas S. Power, commander of the Strategic Air Command, has said that with only 300 missiles, half of them of intermediate range, the Soviets "could virtually wipe out our entire nuclear strike capability within a span of 30 minutes." If this be so, what is the basis for the administration's new missile optimism?

There would seem to be two possible bases for optimism. One is that [us]ing the updated intellig[ence] estimates, the Pen[tagon] doesn't think the Sovie[ts w]ill have these 300 missile[s wi]th which to deal the devas[tating blow at] any point during our period of missile inferiority (before the newer solid-fueled and more maneuverable types beyond the Atlas come into play). The administration avers that the gap is no longer three to one. Senator Stuart Symington (D) of Missouri, one of the chief congressional experts on defense, says the missile gap is greater than three to one and still may be growing.

The other basis for optimism is the fact that there are so very many other ways of delivering nuclear weapons against Soviet targets that not all these could conceivably be knocked out. They, for instance, could be delivered by fighter bombers from NATO airfields or by maneuvering aircraft carriers. And, of course, the administration is ready to keep a percentage of its SAC bombers in the air at all times—thus invulnerable to surprise attack—as the missile gap goes through its most serious stage.

Do these two "points for optimism" nullify the deterrent gap? Is it safe to base national survival on admittedly imperfect intelligence estimates? Should the administration rely mainly on its SAC bombers, plus the Atlas ICBMs in small quantities, until the really concealable solid-fueled Polaris and Minuteman are ready, two to four years hence?

The evidence is not all in. And the debate, political or otherwise, will continue. For at issue are questions of national survival.